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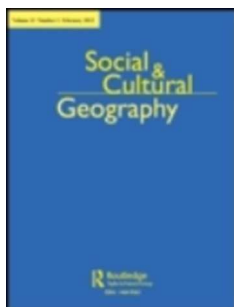
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## Liquid passions: enrolling bodies in city waters

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Keywords:	Water, Publics, Passions, Politics, Blue space, Vibrant matter
Abstract:	<p>Abstract</p> <p>This article explores water's capacities as a vibrant matter with specific properties that generates passions, attachments and a sense of belonging, and which enrolls bodies in new connections, socialities, alliances and politics in unpredictable ways. Based on research into practices and engagements with water in a large urban public space the paper builds on studies of blue space. It concludes that water has the capacity to enhance a sense of well being in those that swim in it and to mobilise a very particular sense of embodiment which gives this form of public space its distinctiveness constituting new forms of sociality and connections amongst diverse individuals. It seeks to do this by paying attention to the experiences of things themselves and the active participation of nonhuman forces in events and the 'vital materiality' that runs through and across bodies both human and non human. The article also explores water's capacity to be constituted and defined by experts as dangerous and risky matter, and to thus engender political associations and connections amongst diverse groups who seek to oppose such expert interventions.</p>

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**Liquid passions: bodies, publics and city waters.**

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In ‘Ulysses’ James Joyce’s masterpiece published in 1922, the hero’s admiration of water knew no bounds. For Leopold Bloom it was *‘its universality: its democratic equality and constancy to its nature in seeking its own level ..... the simplicity of its composition, two constituent parts of hydrogen with one constituent part of oxygen: its healing virtues..... its docility in working hydraulic millwheels, turbines, dynamos, electric power stations, bleachworks, tanneries, scutchmills’*. Bloom is by no means a lone voice. Water’s centrality and significance to all forms of life has long been recognized and analysed across the biological, environmental, and geographical sciences. Cultural artifacts from literature and poetry to the visual arts are steeped in images, representations and references to water in its ubiquity of forms. Although it has always been a central actor in urban planning, civic engineering and policy arenas, what is more recent is an attention to water in the more socio-cultural and socio-technical accounts of the city (e.g Foley, and Kistemann, 2015; Game and Metcalfe, 2011; Volker and Kistemann,2013; Whatmore, 2013)

This article explores the practices and engagements with water in a large urban public space- Hampstead Heath in North London. The aim was to unpack water’s capacities as a material thing, with specific properties, that generates particular passions, attachments and a sense of belonging, and which enrolls bodies in new connections, socialities, alliances and politics in unpredictable ways. The paper builds on studies of blue space (Volker and Kistemann 2011; Coleman and Kearns 2015; Foley 2105) and Strang’s (2004;2005;2006;2009) work, most of which have been conducted in rural areas focusing instead on a large tract of land embedded in a highly urbanized metropolitan area. It sought to do this by paying attention to the experiences of things themselves and the active participation of nonhuman forces in

events and the 'vital materiality' that runs through and across bodies both human and non human.

There is now a well-established body of work that has provided important insights into the significance of water in the social production of space and contributed to the still fruitful attention to infrastructures as lively actors and protagonists in the city (see Amin, 2014). Gandy's work (2002,2004), for example, has been important in investigating the social and political implications of a shift from the development of modern integrated hydrological networks and infrastructures to the ways in which the provision of water in the contemporary era is fragmented and differentiated. Here he deploys the substance of water to think through the materiality of urban space and the changing relationship between the human body and urban technological networks (Gandy, 2004,p.365). Proposing the notion of the bacteriological city, with its focus on pollution and disease control, he suggests that this idea was crucial to the public realm both in physical and political/governmental terms (ibid, 367). Gandy and others have explored different dimensions of large water infrastructures and their connections with new forms of urban governance and a distinctive technological and municipal landscape (Gandy, 2002,2004; Swyngedouw, 2004; Swyngedouw and Kaika, 2002; Kaika, 2005). As Gandy (2004, p.373) puts it: 'Water implies a series of connectivities between the body and the city, between social and bio-physical systems, between the evolution of water networks and capital flows, and between the visible and invisible dimensions to urban space. But water is at the same time a brutal delineator of social power which has at various times worked to either foster greater urban cohesion or generate new forms of political conflict'.

Though this work has been helpful in providing a wider context for my thinking, the focus here is different. My concern is water's capacity to activate passions, to promote attachments and a sense of belonging, and to summon new alliances, socialities, connections and contestations in urban public space. In this I am building on a relatively new direction of research in public space, which has shifted the analysis of public space as a predominantly dematerialized realm of sociality, encounter and connection albeit in often liminal and marginal rather than formalized spaces (e.g. Watson, 2006; Rhys Taylor, 2013), to the notion of public space as co-produced within networks of different actors, which may include humans, non-humans, objects and matter (Carter et al, 2011;Molotch; 2010;Watson 2015). In this article, water as a

substance with very specific attributes, associations, and meanings is the matter of concern.

In the debates on public space, until recently, the importance of water in enrolling multiple publics has been remarkably absent from debates and investigation, with a few exceptions. An important new direction of research has articulated the significance of blue space, as opposed to green space. For Volker and Kistemann (2011, p.449) ‘the term ‘blue space’ summarises all visible surface waters in space as an analogy to green space, not as a sub-category’. The majority of research to date explores ocean and river waters rather than urban blue spaces, for example, Coleman and Kearns (2015) consider how blue space shapes the everyday life of living on an island in a New Zealand context which helps maintain the sense of well being amongst older people, Foley (2015) explores swimming as a healthy body-water engagement in outdoor Irish swimming spots. In an urban setting Völker and Kistemann (2013, 2015) explore the importance of urban blue spaces for health and well being in two German cities. Another focus, particularly in Australia, has been the space of the beach (Fiske, Hodge, and Turner Fiske, 1987; Game, 1990; Booth, 2001; Obrador-Pons 2007), where the beach has been seen as a signifier of a national identity that rejects separations of class, as inherited from Britain, and gender but strikingly not race (Poynting, 2006). In this respect Lobo (2014) in a study of a beach in Darwin suggests that whiteness constitutes a force that exerts affective and wounding pressures on non-white bodies in hypervisible public spaces constituting racially differentiated everyday experiences.

Another arena of public space that has commanded attention is the waterfront. In her book on Amsterdam waterscapes, for example, Kinder (2015) explores the conversion of water into a performance space for the mobilization of different identities-hippies living in house boats, queer parties on the canal, and more recently the emergence of cultural events on the canals, such as the Gay Pride Parade, Queen’s Day pleasure boating and the Canal Festival. The materiality of water artifacts in the shape of the public toilet represents the frame through which Molotch and Noren (2010) explore the politics of sharing in public space. This research builds more directly on Strang’s (2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2009) extensive and illuminating research from an

anthropological and political ecology perspective, which posits water as 'a vital "natural symbol" of sociality and of human-environmental interdependence' (Strang, 2006, p.155), something which she attributes to water's specific qualities of fluidity and transmutability which mobilise discourses and metaphors about flows and interconnections. Like others, Strang points to the composition of human beings as approximately 60 - 75% water which promotes a particular affinity with this element. Central to her research has been an exploration of different cultural groups' engagements with water in a diversity of contexts- the Stour river in Dorset (2004), the Brisbane and Mitchell rivers in Queensland (2009), and the ways in which these interactions mediate and constitute wider individual and collective identities within a complexity of social, cultural, economic, material, political and institutional relationships. Comparing different water sites, Strang (2004) draws attention to cross cultural differences in cultural, spiritual, political and environmental meanings of, and attachments to, water while also suggesting there are universalities across time and space in the diverse interconnections between living organisms who are themselves composed largely of water- and water in its myriad of forms. The major part of Strang's fascinating research into the identities and socialities constituted in human interactions with water, have taken place in rural areas. Where her focus has shifted to the urban, she has explored water features in Brisbane as a material culture supporting practices directed towards establishing or maintaining community identities and celebrating social cohesion (2012,p.99). Strang's (2004, 2005a,2005b, 2005c, 2009) research draws attention to water as a site of belonging and attachment.

Interviews at my research sites support this contention. So also, water mobilized discourses of spirituality and healing, which confirm Anderson's (2103) argument based on Australia based research that the surfed wave is not simply a site of human-nature relations, but is also a space of spirituality which evokes transcendent experiences. Perhaps, the use of water in religious ceremonies and practices- baptism in Christianity, the washing of feet and hands in Islam, immersion in the Ganges in Hinduism- and creation myths deploying images of water (Seamon and Mugerauer 1985, p.265), play a part in constituting everyday water spaces as religiously inflected matter with special powers.



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Much of the work discussed so far argues for the affective powers of water, connecting with a now fairly well established set of literatures on emotional geographies (Anderson and Smith, 2001). Some of this work engages also with insights from non representational theory (Thrift, 2007) with its attention to the experiences of things themselves and the active participation of nonhuman forces in events and the ‘vital materiality’ that runs through and across bodies both human and non human (Bennett, 2010). This approach draws attention to particular occurrences and agency as emerging from, and distributed across, human and non-human forces. The entanglements of bodies with water make this approach all the more salient, since its very fluidity, vibrancy and transparency makes possible total immersion and oneness of the bodies that enter it. Anderson and Peters (2014 p. 4-5) similarly seek to demonstrate how the sea is ‘alive with embodied human experiences’ and a space which ‘in and of itself that has material character shape and form... and is in a constant state of becoming’. In this vein Foley (2015), following Andrews et al (2014) and their argument that non- representational theory can uncover, ‘how the well comes into being’, explores the experience of swimming as a well being component of everyday life, where sea and the sky (blue spaces) are deeply implicated in the production of feelings of well being. Drawing on a Bachelard’s phenomenological notion of ‘lived space’ Game and Metcalf (2011) make a related argument in suggesting that it provides a relational alternative to Euclidean understandings of space as empty and inert, by foregrounding space that is both inside and outside, where emotions emerge not from the subject but from living space.

This paper seeks to extend these studies in a more urban context through an exploration of the practices and engagements with water in a large urban public space- Hampstead Heath in North London. In so doing it takes up the theme of affect and aims to investigate the capacity of water as a material thing with specific properties to generate passions, attachment and belonging. Its more novel departure is to connect these arguments with the capacity of water to enroll bodies in new connections, socialities, alliances and politics in unpredictable ways. One way in which these new publics are mobilized politically through water, in Hampstead Heath as we shall see, was through struggles around the notion of risk- that is, of water as a potentially dangerous thing. It concludes by suggesting that water constitutes a key, but

often overlooked, actor in public space in cities, and supports the growing body of literatures that consider the role of matter in animating and co-producing public space and a multiplicity of publics.

### Methods

This research was based on a range of qualitative research methods (Atkinson and Delamont, 2010) committed to Back's (2015, p.821) notion of 'cultivating a sociological sensibility (which) allows us to remark on what is otherwise passed over as unremarkable'. The research was carried out from June 2015 to September 2016. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the local officers, engineers, local residents and swimmers. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The participants were selected to represent key participants in the dam project on the one hand, and active swimmers on the other. After initial contact with the Information Officer for Hampstead Heath, and the Chairs of the Parliament Hill Lido and Women's Pond User groups, I followed up their suggestions as to who would be most beneficial to contact for subsequent interviews. No one that was contacted refused to meet with me. Themes for the swimmers covered- respondents swimming histories and social practices, the significance they attached to swimming on a regular basis, their involvement in social and political activities at the Lido or ponds. The interviewees associated with the dam project were centrally focused on the construction of the dam, its rationale, and the politics generated. I also attended several consultation meetings, and accompanied the information walks conducted by the Corporation with BAM representatives for interested publics recording notes and conversations throughout the two-hour walks. As a local dog walker and swimmer, I took field notes, photographs and noted conversations of passers-by on a regular basis during the research period. Archival information, including planning documents, council meeting minutes and local newspapers, was also drawn upon. Consent was obtained for the interviews and their use in my research. Names were anonymised.

In the next section I introduce Hampstead Heath. This is followed by a discussion of key moments in the recent history when water on the Heath, in its different forms, has mobilized dissension and contestation amongst diverse publics involved with the site. The



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point here is that water has the capacity to enroll multiple publics in its defense, and that it is at moments of conflict that the depth of passions for watery spaces and sites is revealed. The paper then turns its attentions to water as a site of passionate attachment, and water in its capacity to enrol bodies in a multiplicity of connections, socialities, alliances and politics.

Hampstead Heath and its water.

Hampstead Heath is a large open space in North London (320 hectares /790 acres) bordering Hampstead on its Western edge, Highgate on the Northwest, Dartmouth Park on the East and Gospel Oak on its South side. This is an area of London where houses typically cost well over £1 million, and the majority of residents have high levels of education and income, including concentrations of the new global wealth elites (Webber and Burrows, 2015) and are white. Hampstead Heath has been a popular public space since for Londoners, particularly since the early nineteenth century when Hampstead Heath station was opened (Jackson not dated). In 1871 the Metropolitan Board of Works purchased the original 220 acres of heath from a wealthy landowner and the Hampstead Heath Act 1871 was passed which established the Heath as a natural space in London for the ‘benefit of all users and for the prevention of development or encroachment upon it’ and which included a clause that: "the Board shall at all times preserve, as far as may be, the natural aspect and state of the Heath."

In 1889 the recently formed London County Council took over the management of the Heath, leading to fears that it would be turned from its largely uncultivated meadow-like form into a municipal park, and the subsequent formation of the Hampstead Heath Protection Society in 1897 to preserve the ‘natural and wild’ state of the heath for public to enjoy. Over the following decades additional land was added from a number of benefactors. In 1972 the London County Council was replaced by the Greater London Council (GLC), resulting in a renewed concern that the heathland would be tamed and a reinvigoration of the former Hampstead Protection Society, shortly to be renamed as Heath and Hampstead Society (still in existence). With the abolition of the GLC in the 1986 Hampstead Heath was transferred to the London Residuary Body and, in 1989, to the Corporation of London (CoL)

in whose hands it remains. The CoL were the key statutory players during the period of this research.

Water is crucial to the identity and embodied experience of this public space. There is a chain of fresh water ponds, fed on the Eastern side, by the river Fleet, three of which have been used by swimmers since the 1880s. The two ponds that feature in this study are the women's pond and men's pond exclusively accessible to one gender, which are hidden behind trees and surrounded by grassy banks, and which include wooden changing rooms and showers. There are many other ponds, some inaccessible, others designated for dog swimming, model boats, or used by anglers- there are some 342 fishing permit holders on Hampstead Heath. At the southern end of the Heath is the Parliament Hill Lido (61 × 27 meters) which was opened in 1938 as part of the London County Council's imitative from 1920-39 to build thirteen lidos across London, to provide healthy recreation opportunity for Londoners. The Lido has separate changing rooms for men and women, with an open shower area where most of the sociality is enacted. Like the ponds the London Residuary Body took over the Lido 1986, followed by the Corporation of London in 1989. The Lido was Grade II Listed in January 1999. An average of 50,000 visitors swim in the Lido each year. In 2005 the Lido was refurbished with a stainless steel bottom, which sparkles in the sunlight. Like most London Lidos it is unheated.

*Photo 1 Parliament Hill Lido*

### Water Politics

In recent years several interventions by the Corporation of London (CoL) into Hampstead Heath have revealed the capacity of water in public space to mobilise passions and to enroll bodies in new connections and politics. These have had significant consequences for the unfolding of water-human interconnections in Hampstead Heath. In both major struggles between locals and the CoL discourses of risk have been key (following Beck's (1992) notion of a shift to a risk society) as risk analysis came to dominate decision-making. In brief, in 2004 the Corporation of London attempted to restrict winter swimming in the ponds in 2004. This was articulated as necessary to limit the risks associated with cold-water swimming. Expert reports were mobilized by the COL or justify their argument that cold-water swimming was hazardous to swimmers, particularly novices, who

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were liable to suffer heart attacks when entering cold water. Opposition from the winter swimmers was fierce, with swimmers arguing that it was their choice if they wanted to risk their lives in the ponds, and that the probability in any case was negligible.

CoL’s intervention to construct a dam at one of the ponds was similarly articulated around the notion of risk. The key legislation affecting the ponds and reservoirs on Hampstead Heath are the Reservoirs Act 1975 and the Floods and Water Management Act 2010. Under the Reservoir Act the designation of a body of water over 25,000 cubic meters defines it as a reservoir. This initially only applied to three of the ponds on the Heath. However the Floods and Water Management Act 2010, and not yet enforced, reduced the definition of statutory reservoirs to 10,000 cubic meters, and those in a chain with a combined volume greater than 10,000 cubic meters, effectively therefore affecting all the ponds on the Heath. A report was commissioned by the City of London from hydrologists, Haycock Associates, in 2011 to determine the ponds’ compliance with the two Acts, which concluded that during ‘extreme rainfall events,’ the dams retaining the ponds on Hampstead Heath could not be relied upon to store the additional volume of water, with the effect that the excess would ‘over top’ possibly leading to a breach (COL, 2013). If this water combined with the floodwater, there would be potential risk to life and property downstream. The large number of visitors to the Heath, it was argued, exacerbates this risk in summer, with the ground’s consequent compaction and inability to absorb water. The report’s conclusion was that the Probable Maximum Flood (PMF) - as it was called- under the conditions produced by a very large storm could thus lead to a catastrophe causing loss of life and damage to property downstream. The probability of such an event was recorded as 1 in 400,000, and though like many engineering models operating with uncertainties which ‘represent an abstract and idealized version of the mathematical properties of a target’ (Murphy et al, 2011). The precision of the figure denoting possible risk (if essentially impossible to define accurately) became the red rag to a bull for those in opposition who emphasised the absurdity of the need for intervention (Mike, Superintendent of Hampstead Heath, interview). In another study where the idea of flood risk played Whatmore (2013, p.39) refers to those ‘moments of ontological disturbance in which the things on which we rely as unexamined parts of the material fabric of our everyday lives become molten.

Such situations, matters or forces render expert knowledge claims, and the technologies through which these become hardwired into the working practices of commerce and government, the subject of intense political interrogation'. These ponds for many years which had represented the 'material fabric' of the heath, where people swam, fished, sat in contemplation, were suddenly rendered a space of danger to be addressed. In this sense the notion of risk represented the rationale for the intervention and the political opposition that ensued. Once the figure entered the public sphere it became a key signifier and actor – a non human force- in the events that followed assembling voices of dissent resting like many other similar analyses on predictions which lay themselves open to contestation as effectively impossible to prove prior to the catastrophic event's occurrence. As Ritvo (2009,p.177) argued in her history of Thirlmere reservoir in Cumbria: *All modern environmental arguments rest on predictions- usually (although not always) about benefit to some people or about harm to landscape, flora, fauna, and other people. Like all predictions, they are, by definition, unprovable - at least at the time.*

A subsequent detailed study was commissioned from another engineering company- Atkins, using computer-modeled results to assess the largest probably maximum flood (the PMF) that the dams could face and their ability to withstand it (CoL, 2013). Though this report estimated flood peaks at 30% to 50% lower than Haycock it similarly concluded that there were potential risks to life and property downstream and that reparations were needed to ensure the PMF safety level. Atkins then considered the different feasible engineering options on each pond chain alongside the environmental mitigation and compensation. Two further reports are of relevance to the story. AECOM engineering was hired by Camden to peer review the Atkins report that similarly endorsed the need for the works. An independent Strategic Landscape Architect was appointed to act as a liaison between the Ponds Project Stakeholder Group and the Design Team and to act as a champion for the landscape and to challenge, if necessary, the design.

On 28<sup>th</sup> November 2014 the case was adjudicated at the High Court where the judgment ruled in favour of the works, and the Hampstead and Highgate Society were refused permission to Appeal. The final episode in the story took place in 15

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January 2015 at Camden Town Hall when Camden Planning Committee made its decision to go ahead with the project, based on the AECOM report, in the face of almost unanimous opposition from the multiple publics present in the committee room. As one local campaigner wrote: *“now the public has been asked by Camden whether they are prepared to sacrifice this treasured historic landscape to these extreme measures for the sake of a risk that may never happen; their answer has been a resounding ‘no’. But they are ignored, dealing a lethal blow not just to the Heath landscape but to democracy itself* (Marcus, 2015).

Thus, at the heart of the rationale for the intervention lay discourses of risk. From the Corporation of London’s point of view they were responsible for the reservoirs and, as a ‘risk averse organisation’ (Jane, Information Officer, C of L, Interview), were required to act. What is interesting here, as in other public spaces, is that the articulation of a risk identifying a danger which may have been present for many years and invisible, makes action seemingly inevitable, since however unlikely its possible occurrence, responsibility for failure to act would be clearly attributable. Even though the risk was low, the consequences were considered to be immense. According to Mike, the superintendent: *‘Many of the properties downstream have basements. If the dam collapsed and if there were a cascade effect- it would be catastrophic – the predicted loss of life is 1000 people. It might happen once in 400,000 years – but if it did happen it would be terrible.’* Like many of the protagonists in favour of the intervention, the superintendent exemplified Vogel’s (2012) precautionary principle which *“in essence enables, encourages, or requires policy makers to “err on the side of caution” by adopting relatively stringent regulations- even if the available scientific evidence of the risks posed by a particular business practice or product to public health, safety or environmental quality are unclear, inconclusive, ambiguous or uncertain... it enables policy makers to impose regulations on the basis of a potential or reasonable likelihood of harm, especially when there is a possibility that the harms stemming from a failure to regulate may prove serious or irreversible’.*

A rather different intervention by the C of L further mobilized the swimming publics, connections and alliances on the Heath. In June 2015 the City of London Corporation initiated talks with the sports and leisure company Fusion Lifestyle to consider their



possible management of the space. Fusion's reputation was poor following their management of another Lido in an adjoining borough (Park Road in Haringey), which, according to a local swimmer had been shambolic (Banks, 2015). The concern expressed by the swimmers was that the pool would be closed during the winter months when fewer users render the pool less profitable. In the context of a drive to find new ways to raise income as the Corporation faces a 10% cut to its Open Spaces budget, this was considered as one option. At the time of writing no decision had been made.

In each of these interventions, the vibrant matter of water runs through, shapes and flows across human and non human bodies, where the agency that emerges, as Bennett (2010) suggests is the effect of unplanned and random configurations of human and nonhuman forces.

### Mobilising Passions

The extent to which water mobilized passions, attachment and a sense of belonging formed a key theme explored in the interviews, following Strang's research which highlighted this aspect of water's capacities. Gillian, chair of the Parliament Hill Lido Users Group (PHLUG) eloquently explained:

*When I'm not here, when I'm travelling with work, I miss it. You can't recreate it, ... I think a lot of us or many of us found the lido at a time when we needed to find it. I certainly did and I know a lot of people who have come when relationships have broken up, when work has been bad.. ... And I always talk about the healing waters of the lido because I think they are in a way and I know ... it sounds so hippy but it has absorbed so much negative energy from me over the years, I always leave there feeling a million dollars. I might go in feeling like shit, I might have had a terrible time, I might be hung-over but it will always make me feel better. So for that reason it is personal so when somebody says we want to do something to the lido or there's anything that they might want to change.., then I react because I want to save it, because ...I know that it saved me and I know that it has saved a lot of other people as well. I think anybody that you speak to I think you would get the same opinion, that it has a kind of almost mythical quality that just makes you feel better and has improved my quality of life enormously.*



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Gillian’s description of how the water makes her feel better the intensity of this description vividly reveals strong connections between water and wellbeing, a theme that has been explored in different non urban contexts also (Andrews, Chen and Myers, 2014; Coleman, and Kearns, 2015). This quote also reinforces Strang’s (2005c,p.21) argument that water is always encoded with powerful themes of meaning, and associated with the notion of being a healing substance with particular energies, and often also gendered (ibid,p.32). If an argument in the defense of public space from privatization is that it offers a space of respite from the stresses and strains of late capitalist urban life, then water’s capacity to provide solace, a sense of well being, and spiritual connection needs recognition.

Gillian and Barbara- the Chair of the Kenwood Ladies Association - also give a sense of how water creates a space for some kind of memory to form, either of a fantasy or a real moment, which remains with the person as they travel on through their daily lives, giving them a feeling of calm and relaxation which survives the embodied and physical experience of immersion in the water. As Barbara put it:

*Swimming I just kept a diary every day of what was happening and it was just brilliant. And it’s all that thing about how you relate to water, what sort of ... I mean I remember one day coming back and thinking about being a mermaid. What is it that, the relationship between you as a human and the water and this myth of a mermaid. ‘*

These comments confirm the idea of water as a space of immersion where water enacts new forms of being human, and where the figure of the mermaid stands in for water/human hybridity. Such sentiments were echoed in many of the interviews with pond and lido swimmers:  
*‘That moment when a kingfisher flies over my head stays with me later on the sweaty Northern line. I hesitate to say it’s spiritual but there is something magical and peaceful about being here’*  
(Woman, 40s).

Through the interviews and observations what emerged was the power of water as a space of redemption (being born again) and immersion away from the messiness and tensions of the everyday, and as a space of connection with the sublime and with

tranquility. This also has something to do with the specificity of embodiment in water, where water and skin collide and connect, with few barriers or protection in the form of clothes to disrupt the assemblage. This was particularly evident at the women's pond, where many women lie on the grass banks with no covering across the top half of their bodies, and where respondents described how freeing they found the green space at the water side, and the fresh water of the pond fed by a river, where chemicals are absent, made them feel more connected to 'nature' than when swimming in man made pools.

Unlike Foley's outdoor swimmers, who found it difficult to verbalise their swimming experience (2014, p. 224), the all-year swimmers, particularly those who go in the early morning, were particularly vociferous in articulating their passion for the ponds and the Lido. But this passion is also prevalent amongst people who confine their swimming to summer months, who represent a multiplicity of publics particularly at the ponds, where women and men of all ages, ethnicities and sexualities congregate on the banks of the men's and women's ponds on hot days. While observing and listening to conversations, I heard countless expressions of delight and excitement. At the women's pond (and no doubt at the men's pond too where I was unable to enter) the water itself as a fluid and inclusive substance allows women to swim together around the pond chatting as they go, to relax holding on to one of the life saving rings, to laugh as women stand on the edge hesitating before throwing themselves into the cold water, teasing each other for their hesitation. This is more than a public space of mutual co-existence, rather, water constitutes the bodies within it as intermingled and connected. Women from minority communities, such as Hasidic and Muslim, where the display of bodies in front of men apart from their husbands is forbidden, swim in the pond which represents a rare opportunity to swim in an open air space, constitute a regular group at the women's pond.

Finally, the opposition to the introduction of mentioned earlier led to a compromise between the swimmers and the Corporation of London in the material form of the introduction of a fee paying machine which resembles a parking meter, where women can voluntarily pay for their swim. With the exception of those who are new to the pond, and tourists in particular, swimmers described taking pleasure in their daily act of resistance as they walk past the meter ignoring its silent exhortation to pay. Free access to the ponds is part of the charm that enchants those that swim there,

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articulated through a discourse of water should be free to everyone and not a commodity for profit.

Passion for the water sites on the Heath is not restricted to the swimmers. Anglers, walkers, people in wheel chairs, and non-humans (dogs are particularly expressive in their love of water, and a specific pond is designated for their use) also spoke enthusiastically of their attachment to the Heath ponds, and were fierce in their defense of these spaces from the inception of the dam project, as we see shortly. Anglers, all male and predominantly, white working class, emphasized the peace and serenity of the ponds, their sense of wildness, particularly at night, which had enticed them time and time again over the years (one man interviewed had been fishing there for 40 years).

Enrolling bodies: connections and socialities

I turn now to water's capacity not simply to attach humans to itself and to place, but also to its capacity to enroll people in new social connections. The Lido attracts a diversity of people, in class, age and ethnic terms, during the summer months when families come with children to spend all day at the side of the pool, mimicking a beach culture in the city. Interviews and participant observation at the Lido revealed strong social networks, particularly (but by no means exclusively) amongst the early morning swimmers and those who swam throughout the year between 7 and 9 am. The early morning queue is characterized by gossip, banter and laughter, which continue at the side of the pool and the showers afterwards. Women shout from cubicle to cubicle, sharing news and information, teasing and joking with one another.

Deborah: *And we're always laughing. Actually there was one time, we didn't mean to do it but we ended up doing a little experiment because Sue turned up without her swimsuit one day and she said: 'Oh crap'.*

*And I said, 'Just borrow one'*

*And she said, 'Oh I'm not putting on someone else's swimsuit and she got very upset and I said, 'Well what are you going to do?' And she said, 'I'm going to do an experiment. I'm not going to have a swim, I'm just going to have a shower and then hang out with you guys and get changed and I'm going to see what the effect is.'*

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3 *And actually she said that the effect was the same, with or without*  
4 *the swim. It was just the social collective thing, having a laugh.*  
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7 The fact that these women swam together every day, sharing the  
8 water, where they swam along chatting with one another, or  
9 shouted from the sides, and took showers together afterwards  
10 naked in an open space which houses six showers including one  
11 for women with disabilities, even carried over to a moment when  
12 Sue wasn't swimming. Male respondents, reported similar levels  
13 of jocularly.  
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17 Richard, who swims at the Lido in the winter and the men's pond  
18 in the summer, put it this way:  
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21 *At the lido there's a lot of banter which goes on and a complete*  
22 *disrespect for age, character, etc., whereas at the ponds ....it's*  
23 *much quieter, even though it's a bigger space and in some ways*  
24 *it's the enclosure where we get changed is more open, it's much*  
25 *quieter and you talk within your groups, it's not often that you'll*  
26 *call across to somebody else who is 10 metres away from you on*  
27 *the other side of the enclosure. So if there's 2 or 3 of you*  
28 *together then you might be talking but unlike at the lido you would*  
29 *call across to different cubicles and whatever and answer this*  
30 *voice that's called out and shouted something at you.*  
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35 When someone is ill or in trouble, news travels fast and support is  
36 provided. As Mary, a woman in her 50s explained:  
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39 *And I think it's also because when you swim at the lido,*  
40 *particularly in the winter, you look out for one another. There's*  
41 *that kind of ... It's an unspoken rule but you're ... You are on the*  
42 *lookout for checking that people are OK. So when old Sarah,*  
43 *Doctor Sarah we're talking about, when she used to swim or*  
44 *when Isabel, you know who arrives in the wheelchair, when*  
45 *they're swimming you just keep a weather eye on them just to*  
46 *make sure that they're OK and you know that there are people*  
47 *there that, if any of us got into trouble, there would be someone*  
48 *there to look after you.*  
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53 Such are the social connections amongst the morning swimmers,  
54 who span differences in age and class, that Peter, a 64 year old  
55 local (others come from as far as Croydon to swim each morning),  
56 organized what he jokingly referred to as a 'works outing' during  
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the summer, restricted to the year round swimmers. 20 or so men and women set off from Waterloo by train to Lymington and the Isle of Wight to swim in the lido and beaches there, and share a couple of meals in local pubs. Talk of the event filled the air during the summer months.

The sociality at the ponds is legendary and takes different forms at different times of day and during different seasons. At the men’s pond there are men who have swum there all of the lives, many of whom are local actors, lawyers and members of a dying community of Bohemian residents, gradually being displaced as property prices escalate through overseas and city investment (Webber and Burrows, 2015). At certain times of the day, and particularly during the summer, the men’s pond is a popular meeting place for gay men from across London. According to one swimmer at the pond: *It changes as the day goes on, so when I go there now it will be predominantly gay but certainly in the morning there’s one or two but they’re there for the swim, they’re not there to display themselves or flirt or court or whatever, they’re there be because that’s what they do.*

*Photo 2 The Women’s pond.*

Social interaction at the women’s pond is palpable and has a long history (Griswold,1998). On hot days women come from across London to sit on the banks with friends chatting, sharing picnics and reading, and to swim through the secluded waters shared with ducks and moorhens. The particular presence of the water in this gendered space constitutes the surrounding grassy banks as a place where women can live their naked bodies (no tops are required) and display mutual affection openly without being subject to the male gaze. When the pond was under threat from the dam project, women came together to knit a scarf long enough to encircle the pond, which subsequently was transported to span the meridian at Greenwich- reflecting an interest by some of the swimmers in alternative – and often feminized- spirituality. Others are involved in the women’s pond choir, which on September 10<sup>th</sup> 2016 participated at a Water Aid event on the South bank of the Thames. On New Year’s Day swimmers flock to the pond for a celebratory swim and lunch. And as in many public and institutional spaces, in the last year the transgender has emerged as an issue when women confronted a transgender woman who arrived at the pond asserting that this was an only



woman space. The issue remains under discussion, with dissenting views expressed in the changing rooms, and has been taken seriously by the Corporation, who have arranged for the life guards at the ponds and the Lido to attend transgender training.

For anglers, water enacts a different form of sociality, where the materiality of the equipment – the rod, the bait, the lines, the tents- all very precise and highly prized objects, and the fish to co-produce the (hu)man as angler. Here men who were taught by their fathers to fish from an early age, reported finding peace and tranquility amongst a group of men, whose solitary status finds companionship on the water's edge, sometimes sharing a Kentucky Fried chicken takeaway as they settle down for night fishing- sometimes as many as 30 men sleep in their tents overnight. Conversations with the anglers suggested a nostalgic return to a sense of the 'wild' and a 'freedom' in childhood that had been lost.

As one angler said: *I'd rather sit here and relax and forget about life!*

Like the swimmers, there is an assumption of mutual support – during one of the interviews a duck got caught in one of the fisherman's hook, and my respondent ran to help.

Charlie: *Yeah, you always keep an eye out, I mean at the end of the day they're sitting here doing the same thing you're doing.*

There is a sense here of a masculine (sometimes misogynist) culture (Hatty, 2000). Some of these men described broken marriages, or a choice to live alone:

Peter: *There's more fishermen divorced in the world than anything else....Because everybody likes fishing and the wife don't like it.... Yeah, and it's men who want to get away from the women folk. ... Yeah, and look at this, it's peaceful, isn't it, you haven't got somebody going, 'Wah, wah, wah, do this, do that!'*

Tensions appeared to be non-existent, and when asked about the ethnic mix one angler mentioned the Eastern Europeans who wanted to take the carp home to eat, to whom he had explained that this was not permitted under the terms of the fishing license.



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Much of the sociality I have described so far is informal and serendipitous. However, when the water is perceived to be under threat, these more alliances and connections translate into political practices.

Water politics

So far we have seen how water in place invokes passions, attachments, encounters and connections thus shifting debates (Sennett,2010, Watson,2006, Young,1990) where public space is predominantly de-materialised. Urbanists have only recently been attentive to the liveliness of objects and matter in co-constituting public space, and the people who inhabit it. In this section, I consider how water on Hampstead Heath has constituted an active politics and produced lively networks, assembling not only those directly involved with water in an embodied sense, but also those who simply love the Heath and its water sites, as walkers and local residents. The first moment in our story where water mobilized a political response, was the Corporation of London’s attempt to restrict winter swimming in 2004. This was articulated as necessary to limit the risks associated with cold-water swimming. Simultaneously the introduction of entrance fees was proposed as a revenue-generating device. Both strategies met intense opposition as the long established and well-organized swimmers drew on their professional expertise to resist the initiative, foreshadowing the even greater resistance to the construction more than a decade later. Unlike struggles to maintain municipal baths in low-income areas, these events assembled groups of well-educated and predominantly middle class locals who had the time, resources and skills to act as powerful advocates and mobilise strong resistance.

Central to the dam project, as discussed earlier, were discourses of risk. From the dam’s inception, water’s capacity to enrol fierce attachments and passion was evident in the strength of opposition from protesters who mobilized professional connections and networks, and press coverage. Three packed public meetings held in Hampstead, in January 2012, in Belsize Park in November 2013, and in Highgate in February 2014, overwhelmingly condemned the proposals. By the end of that year nearly 13,000 had signed a petition against the works, and 905 people had written with detailed objections to the Planning Application. The local papers- the Ham & High, the Camden New

Journal and the Village Voice had published over 70 articles and letters against the project with headlines like: 'Beautiful Hampstead Heath is about to be mutilated to satisfy corporate greed' (Marcus, 2015) Hampstead Heath ponds project is a dam "fiasco" (Banks, 2015) and 'Warning shot sent to City of London over Hampstead Heath ponds project' (Marshall, 2014). What we see here in this eruption of widespread opposition is 'how environmental disturbances, like flooding or earthquakes, might 'force thought' among the people affected by them and, thereby, occasion new political associations and opportunities.' (Whatmore, 2013, p.34).

Several groups and blogs were established to fight the proposals including members of the Hampstead and Highgate society and 'Damn Nonsense', and national campaigns like 38 degrees mobilized to support the protest. Multiple publics, with unlikely alliances, were constituted through the process, including walkers, swimmers and fishermen, and interested local residents, inflected with the particular socio-cultural mix of Hampstead - artists, intellectuals, lawyers, 'bohemians', and the more recent influx of rich new home owners employed in the media, finance and multinational company sectors. The Chair of the Kenwood Ladies Pond Association described the forceful demands that they had made to ensure that the reconstruction of the old changing rooms and swimming area was done in accordance with the association's wishes with the result that:

*It now looks fabulous... gorgeous.. The water quality's great, the buildings are nice ... when you go into the changing room bit and you walk through into the shower, the showers are at the far end. It's a beautiful big room, a lovely big space, big window there.* (Jan interview).

Unlike open spaces in the constituency of South London that Mike, the superintendent, had encountered in his former job as the director, where he described receiving only 4 letters in the course of a river restoration project on Surrey Commons, this was a vocal, passionate and confident public. The objections were of several kinds. First, there was a concern that the concentration of power to affect the decision lay in the hands of one civil engineer-who was considered to be already partisan in that he was operating under contract from the City, and was acting according to a document – 'Floods and Reservoir Safety'- published by the

Institution of Civil Engineers to which he belonged. As articulated in the Camden New Journal: 'The engineers who implement the "guidance" in Floods and Reservoir Safety and profit from works arising out of it, are the same engineers and their employers who drafted the guidance'. Many saw this as corruption. Their second point was that the dams in their current form were very unlikely to fail; here the prediction that the storm that would cause the dams to flood might only occur once in 400,000 years was repeatedly mobilized. The third set of concerns was that the works would destroy the natural beauty of the heath with the insertion of material artifacts such as large concrete dam walls jutting into the landscape (Mike, interview), which, despite their replacement in the final designs by less ugly material, remained fixed in the minds of the public and a point of contention.

Once the work began, the local newspapers – particularly the Village Voice referred to the devastation being reeked on the heath's natural beauty, a point consistently recorded in my field notes from conversations or overheard comments during the period, with little apparent understanding that nature is always the product of earlier interventions - 'an artificial world, even in most areas of the countryside (Mukerji, 1997,p.36). Jane (information officer) articulated the irony of their position very clearly: *Our reservoirs look like ponds but they are reservoirs. They were built as such. But most people think of them as ponds. As natural. But the whole heath is managed to make it look natural - a huge amount of work goes into creating that effect- if it was not managed it would be scrubby and brambly woodlands.*

As the project has unfolded (at the time of writing the works had been going for 18 months), the opposition diminished for a number of reasons. Many had come to be persuaded of the need for the works to be undertaken, either through reading the reports or attending stakeholders meetings; others were resigned to the fact that the battle had been lost, while others were appreciative of what they saw as considerate construction protocols of BAM-the company on site - and the 'soft engineering' practices they had been required to adopt, or had had their negative preconceptions overturned once work was in progress. Jane:

*A lot of people have assumed the worst- imagining loads of concrete everywhere. ..they haven't taken time to look at the*

plans some of them want to see the worst- a lot of them are pleasantly surprised.

On the site walks in late 2015, only three or four people made negative (if humorous) comments about the ludicrous and unnecessary nature of the works, who were referred to as 'the flat - earthers' by the Chair of a local residents association. The Village Voice has continued to run its campaign on a fortnightly basis with provocative headlines and front covers like the November 2015 issue whose cover displayed a photograph of the site workers and a caption: 'With a contract worth £17 million do we really give a dam?'

The third space of conflict around water, as indicated earlier, was the proposed privatization of the Lido. Gillian (Chair of PHLUG and a strong outspoken Scottish medic) explained how the users group had been virtually moribund for years, and largely ignored by other swimming campaigners on the Heath. In the spring of 2016, the recognition that the Lido was a precious resource that needed protection mobilized swimmers to vote in a stronger spokesperson to represent the Lido at the Corporation of London's Swim Forum. Since the renaissance of the group, there has been a vibrant politics, where marketing sub-group have set up Twitter accounts, Facebook pages, Instagram and a new website, produced their own t shirts and sweatshirts with the Lido emblazoned on the front, held meetings – alongside informal chats in the showers- and ran social events, all with the objective of raising funds and the profile of the Lido, and defending it as a public space. To date, £2,000 has been raised. The Lido has also been registered as a community asset, which means no decision can be made without proper consultation. New visions for the Lido now include making use of the surrounding buildings for a yoga center, a sauna, and a gym to join the café already in place.

### Conclusion

This article set out to explore the practices and engagements with water in a large urban public space with the objective of considering how the specific materiality of water generates particular passions, attachments and a sense of belonging, and which enrolls bodies in new connections, socialities, alliances and politics in unpredictable ways. It did so by elucidating the

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experiences of water itself and its active participation in the spaces and events that unfolded. Like other studies, this research revealed that water had the capacity to enhance a sense of well being in those that swam in it. Water in its very substance was revealed as soft and sublime, as redemptive and spiritual, as connecting and enabling, as wild and cleansing. The comments of those interviewed suggested that immersion in water made people feel at one with the world and care free, which I suggest derives from the its very fluidity ‘boundary-less-ness’, vibrancy and transparency. These attributes mobilise a very particular sense of embodiment that gives this particular form of public space its distinctiveness that engenders passionate attachments. Water’s capacity to involve and include different bodies within its mass, representing a space where people can share their sense of embodiment, also is significant in constituting new forms of sociality and connections amongst diverse groups. As such it acts as a democratic leveler where differences are submerged or arguably made fluid.

The significance of water for the making of vibrant public space has been little recognized by urban theorists or urban policy makers. To the contrary, initiatives to provide public swimming pools have been cut as pressures on public expenditure have forced local governments to sell off facilities to private companies, whose involvement is primarily motivated by profit. However, there is growing recognition of the importance of water for public space as city governments install new water features, such as the Bradford mirror pool as a device for urban regeneration, and fountains are now often located in new urban developments enhancing social interaction. As the assistant director of Environmental Enhancement of the Corporation of London (interview), put it:

*The power of water - it is so much about the basics of human life. When it is there and it is in your environment I think there is an immediate and instinctive reaction to it- and it doesn’t really matter what form it is. ...I think it makes you feel like you are safe... it is all about the emotions you can create in your audience....you can change the feeling of something... my favourite time is on completion of a water project going on an ordinary day to see how ordinary people react to it- it is like it has always been there ...you can change a space and make it*



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3 *experienced very differently with water and make interaction*  
4 *between people different.*  
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7 The research on the ponds in Hampstead Heath also revealed  
8 water's capacity to be constituted as dangerous and risky matter,  
9 which has the – often imagined- power to cause floods and  
10 destruction. Once the ponds had been subjected to the 'expert  
11 knowledges' of the hydraulic engineers, however, uncertain and  
12 conditional these might have been, they were defined in terms of  
13 a risk which was difficult for those in opposition to refute, however  
14 spurious or not the evidence base of the argument was revealed  
15 to be. As in Whatmore's study, where water is conceived as a  
16 potential hazard it has the capacity to 'force thought' in those  
17 affected by it, leading to an 'associative politics' which reveals  
18 'the capacity of citizens to band together and act in concert .. in  
19 the manner of a 'swarm', rather than in consequence of some  
20 prefigured category of political interest (e.g. stakeholders) or  
21 class' (Whatmore, 2013, p.40). It was this capacity of water to be  
22 seen as dangerous which underpinned much of the political  
23 action and which mobilized diverse publics.  
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30 In summary, water matters in public space as a vital actor without  
31 which a diversity of democratic and diverse socialities would not  
32 take place. The very substance of water, its softness, fluidity,  
33 transparency and capacities to evoke a sense of attachment and  
34 belonging, which generate new connections and politics, matters.  
35 As such, city governments and local municipalities need to value  
36 and defend water sites that exist in the locality, resisting their take  
37 over by private interests as spaces for the generation of profit, or  
38 their curtailment or closure through the dominance of discourses  
39 of risk. Instead, what is needed is investment in new water sites  
40 as a device for enhancing vibrant public cultures and spaces.  
41 Finally, this article has also contributed to a wider debate that  
42 emphasizes the liveliness of urban infrastructures, objects and  
43 matter, and their capacities to co-produce animated public life.  
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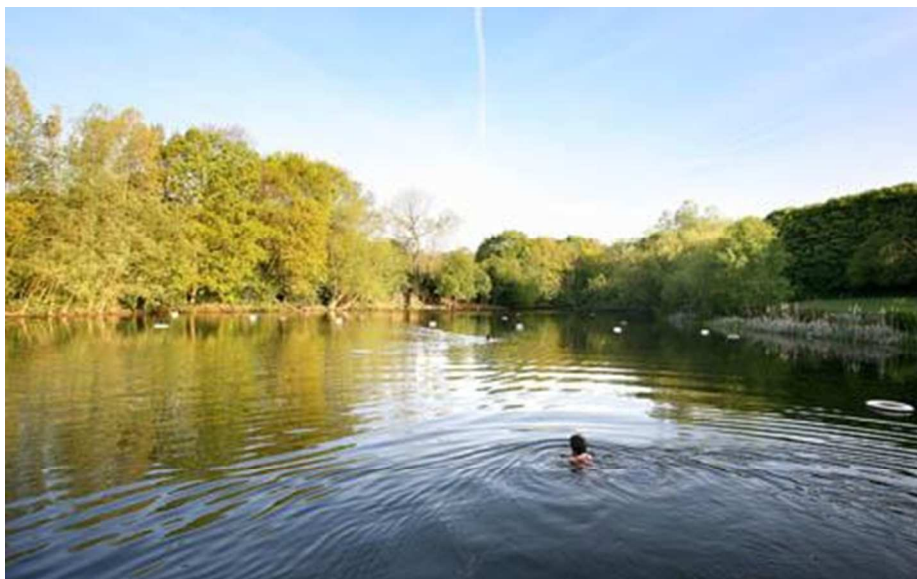
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Photo 1 Parliament Hill Lido  
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Hampstead Women's Pond

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Anglers' Pond

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The Dam Project

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